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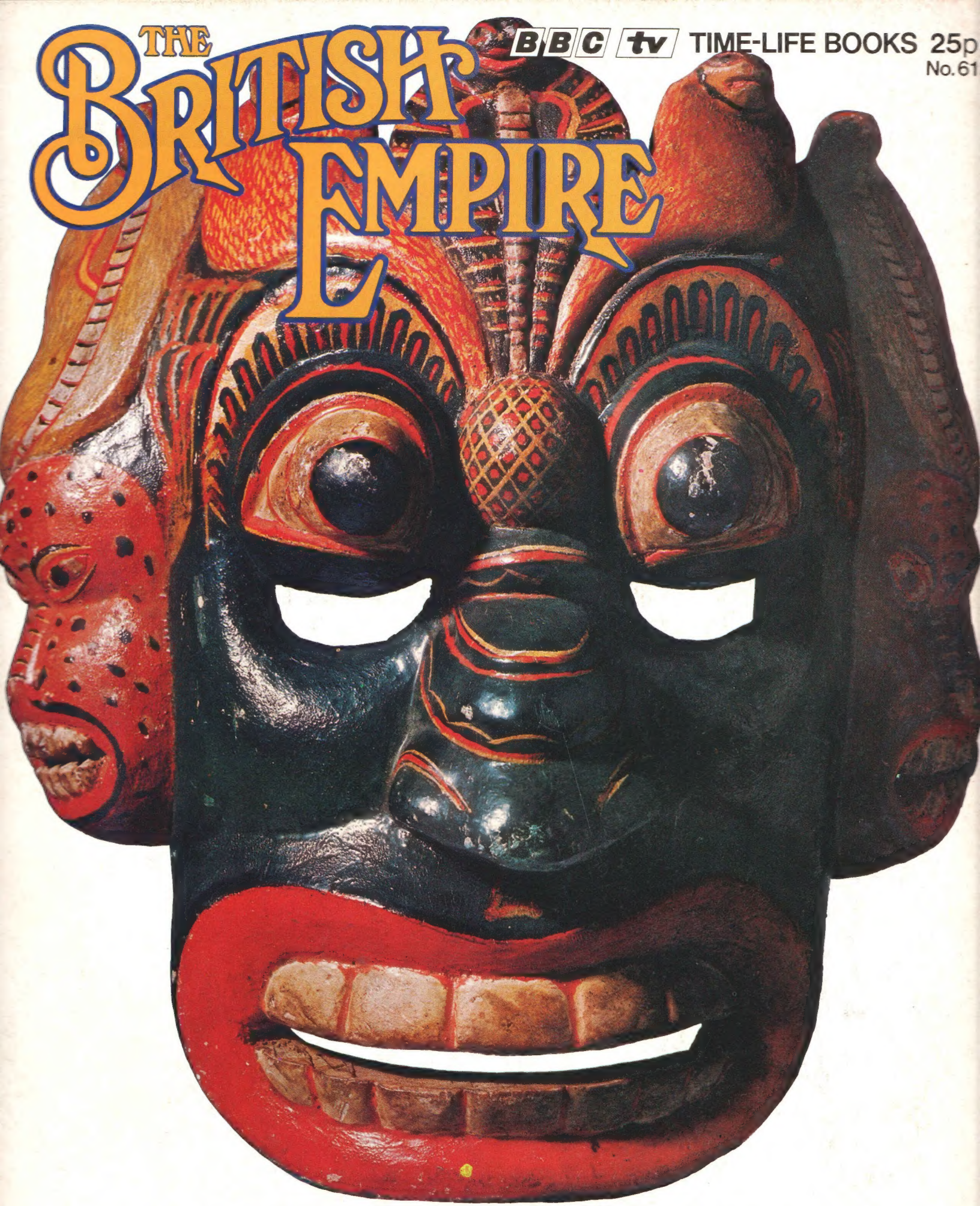

THE MASK OF SAVAGERY
The Art of the Empire's Subject Peoples

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

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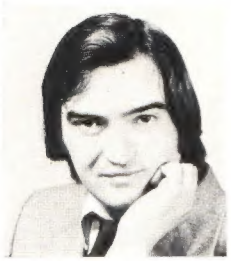

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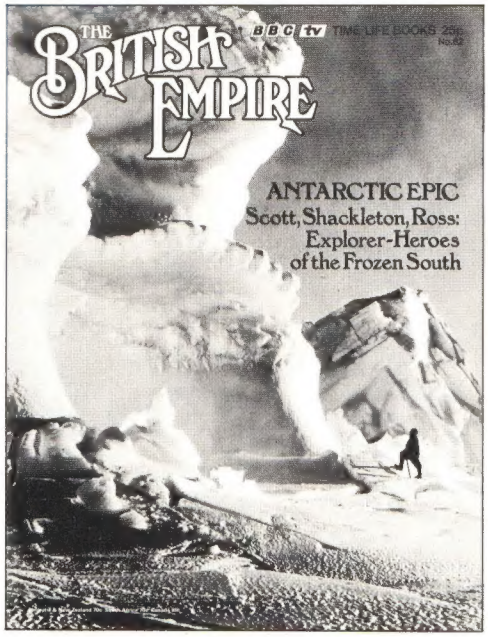

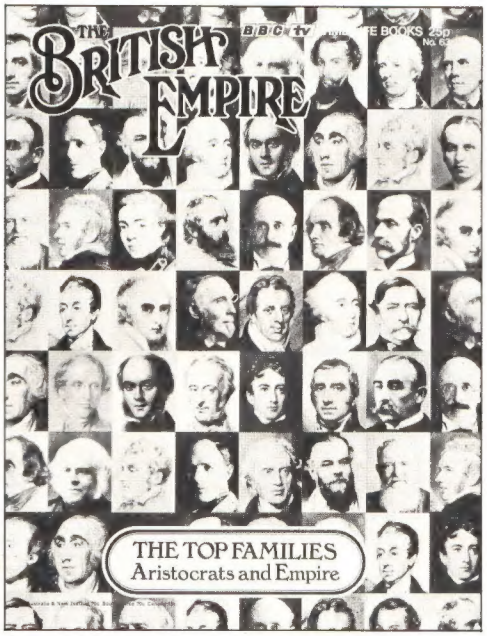

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THE MASK OF SAVAGERY

The art of Britain's subject peoples was, for the majority of the 19th-Century public at home, of no interest at all. Demonic masks, blatantly sexual statues, buildings in incomprehensible styles – such things merely confirmed for many the generally held belief that other races were by definition savage and in need of the enlightening touch of British civilization. Hardly anyone considered that societies which fell to Britain had their own social and artistic traditions and that, however brutal, these were worth studying.

Gradually this attitude changed. Guided by a few discerning critics, artists – and after them, the public – awoke to the skills shown by primitive painters and sculptors and the enormous wealth of artistic achievement displayed by past civilizations – Egyptian, Buddhist, Hindu. The following pages recall the work of those peoples who were particularly significant in the broadening of Britain's aesthetic horizons ❧

By Bevis Hillier

We tend to look back on primitive art today through the eyes of Picasso and the other modern artists whose work was so influenced by native African and Oceanic art. The Cubists, for instance, were responsive to primitive art because it seemed to them somehow instinctive: it was art that expressed what was felt as well as what was seen. And even if the religions and myths in which primitive art was rooted were often dark and demonic, this to the Cubists and many other artistic groups, seemed preferable to the rosy cupids or boudoir Venuses of classical European myth, and the ascetic saints and ecstatic martyrs of Christian tradition.

But this is a 20th-Century development. Before 1900, most Europeans considered primitive art merely barbaric and savage. Cultured men anxious to be thought liberal might pay lip service to the Romantic notion of the "Noble Savage"; but most commonsensical Britons would have agreed with Dickens:

"I beg to say that I have not the least belief in the Noble Savage. I call him a savage, and I call a savage a something highly desirable to be civilized off the face of the earth. . . . It is all one to me, whether he sticks a fish-bone through his visage, or bits of trees through the lobes of his ears, or birds' feathers in his head; whether he flattens his hair between two boards, or spreads his nose over the breadth of his face, or drags his lower lip down by great weights, or blackens his teeth, or knocks them out. . . . Yielding to whichsoever of these agreeable eccentricities, he is a savage – cruel, false, thievish, murderous; addicted more or less to grease, entrails and beastly customs." In no sense, therefore, could he be considered artistic.

This feeling of superiority was shared by the men on the spot in imperial lands. Those who arrived among primitive peoples were either conquerors, to whom the natives were a despised enemy; missionaries, to whom they were heathen; administrators, too often aesthetically unaware men of action to whom the native peoples were the raw material of colonization, with everything to learn and nothing to teach; or traders, whose interest in native artefacts was limited to how much they would fetch as novelties on the home market.

The common reaction of those who do not comprehend a thing is to laugh at it; and the attitude of most Britons to the art of their Empire was to treat it as comic. This applied even to the most stupendous relics of the pharaohs. Shelley made mock of the aspirations of immortality of "Ozymandias of Egypt," of whom there remained only "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" in the desert, and a pedestal inscribed:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Another classic send-up was written by a certain Horace Smith in 1819 after he had seen a mummy in Belzoni's Exhibition at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. Belzoni had come to England from Padua in 1803, and after a short career as a showman, during which he posed as "The Patagonian Samson" and as "Grand Sultan of all the Conjurers," he became an explorer and excavator in Egypt, sending many valuable monuments, busts and sarcophagi to Britain. Of one of Belzoni's mummies, Smith wrote:

Speak! for thou long enough hast acted dummy. . . .
If the tomb's secrets may not be confessed,
The nature of thy private life unfold:
A heart has throbbed beneath that leathern breast,
And tears adown that dusky cheek have rolled.

Native religions and the creations associated with them were particular objects of fun. Sir William Gregory, a late 19th-Century Governor of Ceylon, records the case of an Englishman who took it into his head to jump on to the head of a great Buddha in the North Central Province of Ceylon, from the rock in which it was carved. Sir William wrote: "There would have been only the smallest standing ground, even if the head had been of ordinary construction. But the legend of Buddha gives him a somewhat sloping head with a sharp top-knot. On this slope Mr. Adams alighted; he had then to turn round without any support, and to jump up two or three feet to reach the rock again. . . . The very thought of such a desperate feat makes me giddy." One wonders what Sir William or Mr. Adams would have thought of a Singalese who jumped on to Michelangelo's Pietà in Florence.

A Rev. William Butler provides another example of aesthetic arrogance. He was sent on a mission to India in 1854 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, and in his ponderously entitled *The Land of the Veda, Being Personal Reminiscences of India; its People, Castes, Thugs and Fakirs; its Religions, Mythology, Principal Monuments, Palaces and Mausoleums*, described a visit to the Taj Mahal. He could not forget that the 17th-Century Empress to whom the Taj was a memorial was a sworn enemy of Christianity and had even had that enmity expressed on her tomb. Butler wrote: "Heaven would not answer the fanatical prayer of this mistaken woman; but instead, has placed even her shrine in the custody of those she hated. . . . The writer had the privilege with a band of Christian missionaries, of standing around her tomb, and, in the presence of these words, of joining heartily in singing the Christian Doxology over her mouldering remains."

Though obtuseness and arrogance were the rule when confronted with foreign monuments and institutions, there were exceptions, men of intelligence and influence who gradually brought about a change in British attitudes.

In the early 18th Century, Sir Hans Sloane had begun the British Museum ethnographic collections with exhibits that included "a piece of wood to cover the eyes" (Eskimo snow spectacles), "a small racquette . . . made by the savages of Canada with which they walk on snow." and a "flap made of grasse worn to cover the pudenda" by the Bakongos in Africa. Other items were collected by Sir Francis Nicholson during his governorship of South Carolina in 1721–25, and several by a Captain Middleton from the Iroquois and Hudson Bay areas between 1720 and 1742.

Captain Cook has a special place in the history of changing attitudes towards primitive art; he showed great tact towards the natives, he acquired wide knowledge of their ways and his views were remarkably objective. He had the

knack of asking the right questions and though he sometimes came up with the wrong answers, he was right remarkably often: the voyaging of the Polynesians is still discussed in the terms formulated by Cook in 1777.

Even more outstanding was Sir Stamford Raffles, Lieutenant-Governor of Java during the brief British rule there from 1811 to 1816. Raffles, a man of natural charm, was a model colonial administrator. He treated the Javanese aristocracy with respect, in contrast to the boorish Dutch administrators who preceded him; and they were impressed by the trouble he had taken to learn about their history.

Raffles wrote a great book on the history of Java, much admired by the Prince Regent. Like Cook, he was not always right: when he wrote about the temple of Borobudur (which means "the Great Buddha"), regarded as the most splendid of all Buddhist shrines of antiquity, he did not realize that it was Buddhist, but interpreted the stone reliefs as scenes from Hindu mythology. But, like Cook, he usually asked the right questions. No one will ever be able to write of Java without reference to Raffles.

Raffles also brought back vast collections: his 200 cases of carvings, manuscripts, textiles, plants, stuffed animals, folk art, insects and fruits weighed 30 tons. The collections, many of which came to the British Museum, included shadow puppets and instruments of the *gamelan*, or Javanese orchestra, which Sir Francis Drake had also heard in the course of his voyage round the world in the *Golden Hind* in 1580: Drake gave a performance with his own musicians for "Raia Donan, King of Java," and then heard "his country-musick, which though it were of a very strange kind, yet the sound was pleasant and delightfull."

The custom of enriching the British Museum ethnographical collections was continued by other 19th-Century proconsuls and travellers. The museum obtained a West African collection formed by T. E. Bowdich on a historic mission to the Ashantis in 1817, and Eskimo objects from Captain (later Admiral) Parry's voyage to the Arctic in 1829. In 1841 the ethnography collections had their first royal gift from Queen Victoria – "a collection of curious objects from the South Sea Islands," mainly from Samoa, including "a remarkable imitation of a lady's poke bonnet constructed from thin plates of turtle shell." The first collection from Borneo was given by James Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak, in 1850.

One of the proconsular benefactors of the British Museum was Sir Arthur Gordon (later Lord Stanmore), High Commissioner of the Western Pacific, who presented some Fijian pottery in 1878. Fiji had been annexed by Great Britain in 1874, and Gordon was appointed the first Governor in 1875. Like Raffles, he went out of his way to win over the natives, and while there was obviously no question of his "going native," an account of his menage in C.F.Gordon Cumming's *At Home in Fiji* shows how far an enlightened administrator could go in flattery by imitation: "Lady Gordon has had large shelves made at one end of the drawing-room, on which are placed some of our finest specimens of pottery, and very handsome they are, of rich greenish-yellow and red, glazed with resin. For anti-macassars and sofa-covers we have handsome white native cloth, with rich brown pattern.... The dining room is now beautifully decorated with trophies of spears and clubs, and great bowls, and native cloth. The house is all so thoroughly in keeping with the country: so infinitely preferable to any attempt at making a Europeanised 'Governing House'."

C.F.Gordon Cumming also commented on the degrading effects of "civilized" white influence – as generations of later art critics would do for so many cultures: "But alas for the vulgarizing influence of contact with white men! Already the majority of the islanders have sold their own admirable ornaments, and wear instead trashy English necklaces, with perhaps a circular tin looking-glass attached, or an old cotton-reel in the ear instead of a rudely carved ear-ring. In the more frequented districts this lamentable change thrusts itself more forcibly on the attention, as almost all the fine old clubs and beautifully carved spears have been bought up, and miserable sticks and nondescript articles – including old European battle-axes – take their place." The same kind of thing occurred in the early 20th Century in Java, as local designs were corrupted through the introduction of Western printed calicoes.

The adulteration of primitive cultures by European influence has of course continued. It is a Peter Pan exercise to try to arrest it, no more than saving reserves of anthropologically interesting people to keep the researchers happy. It is hard enough to keep civilized people civilized without attempting to keep primitive peoples primitive. Yet how far we have come from the attitude of Dickens.

In the last decade, the change in attitude has been symbolized by the transfer of the British Museum ethnography department from what resembled a vast, fusty boatshed littered with trophies at Bloomsbury, to the architectural grandeur and scientific arrangement of exhibits at Burlington Gardens.

The change in Anglo-Saxon attitudes to the arts of primitive cultures closely parallels the change in attitude to what used to be called "the Dark Ages" in literature; and the break-through occurred at much the same time, around the turn of the century. It began to be accepted that centuries which contained the great historical writings of Bede, and epics of the stature of Beowulf could not be dismissed as an age of unrelieved blankness: civilization could manifest itself in many different ways.

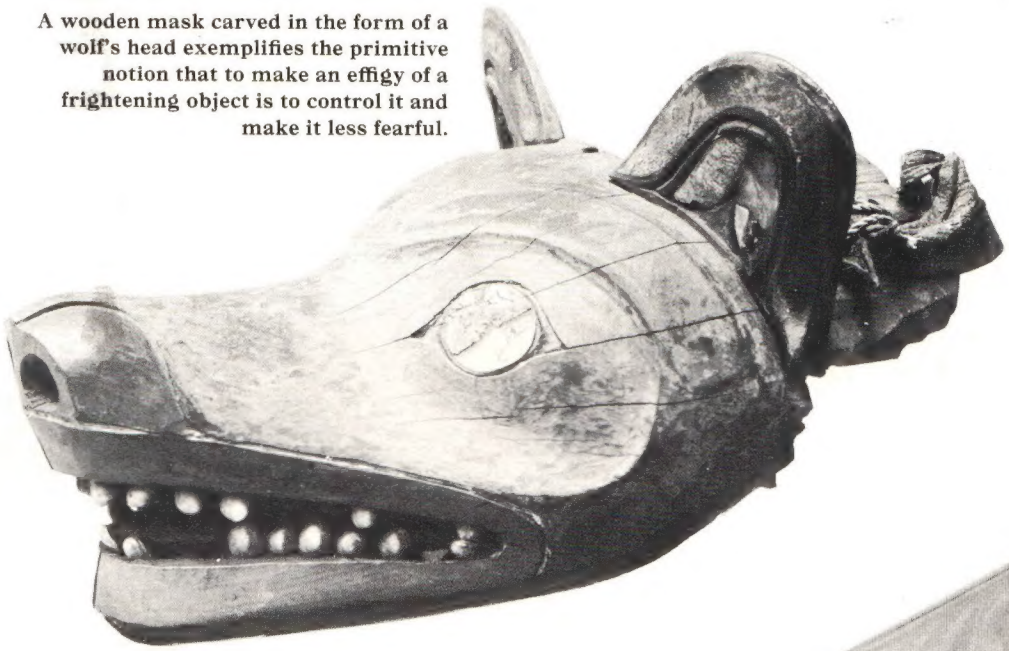
This is precisely the message of the new ethnography; yet perhaps we should not be blinded by our enthusiasm. The primitive creators of fetishes, totems and idols did not see their role as releasing the great instinctive forces of mankind; rather, they were propitiating them. They were unaware of any "sense of the hieratic," any "feeling for synthesis," "profound symbolism" or the other attributes that the post-Cubist world has foisted on them. In many cases, they did not regard what they made as art at all. We should remember that the definition of art and beauty depends, like the definition of savagery and ugliness, on place and time: our attitudes, too, will no doubt be seen as naive, if not positively harmful, by our descendants. These considerations should be borne in mind before dismissing as arrant philistines those who regarded primitive art as merely savage ✱

CANADA

The culture of the north-western Indians and Eskimos of British Canada was unique in the New World in that it reached its zenith after contact with the British – a result of the introduction of better, Western tools.

Even before the arrival of the British, the achievements of north-western civilization were remarkable, considering that the Indians and Eskimos were without agriculture and pottery, the usual accompaniments of cultural advance. They lived in a forbidding seasonal cycle, with winters of interminable night, summers brief as the flight of birds. The need to brighten their surroundings led them to paint the carved posts of their houses in brilliant colours; this in turn led to the carving of decorative poles resembling the totem poles of the Indians to the south. These were not literally totemic objects of religious veneration but heraldic status-symbols, tracing the owner's descent from eagle, wolf or bear. The poles were crammed with detail (a characteristic of much primitive art).

European knives gave a higher finish to such wood carvings, as well as to sculptures in ivory, bone and argillite, a soft stone that hardens in air.



A wooden mask carved in the form of a wolf's head exemplifies the primitive notion that to make an effigy of a frightening object is to control it and make it less fearful.

This Kwakuitl Indian totem pole from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, originally part of a house, was created as a status-symbol to display the owner's wealth and lineage.

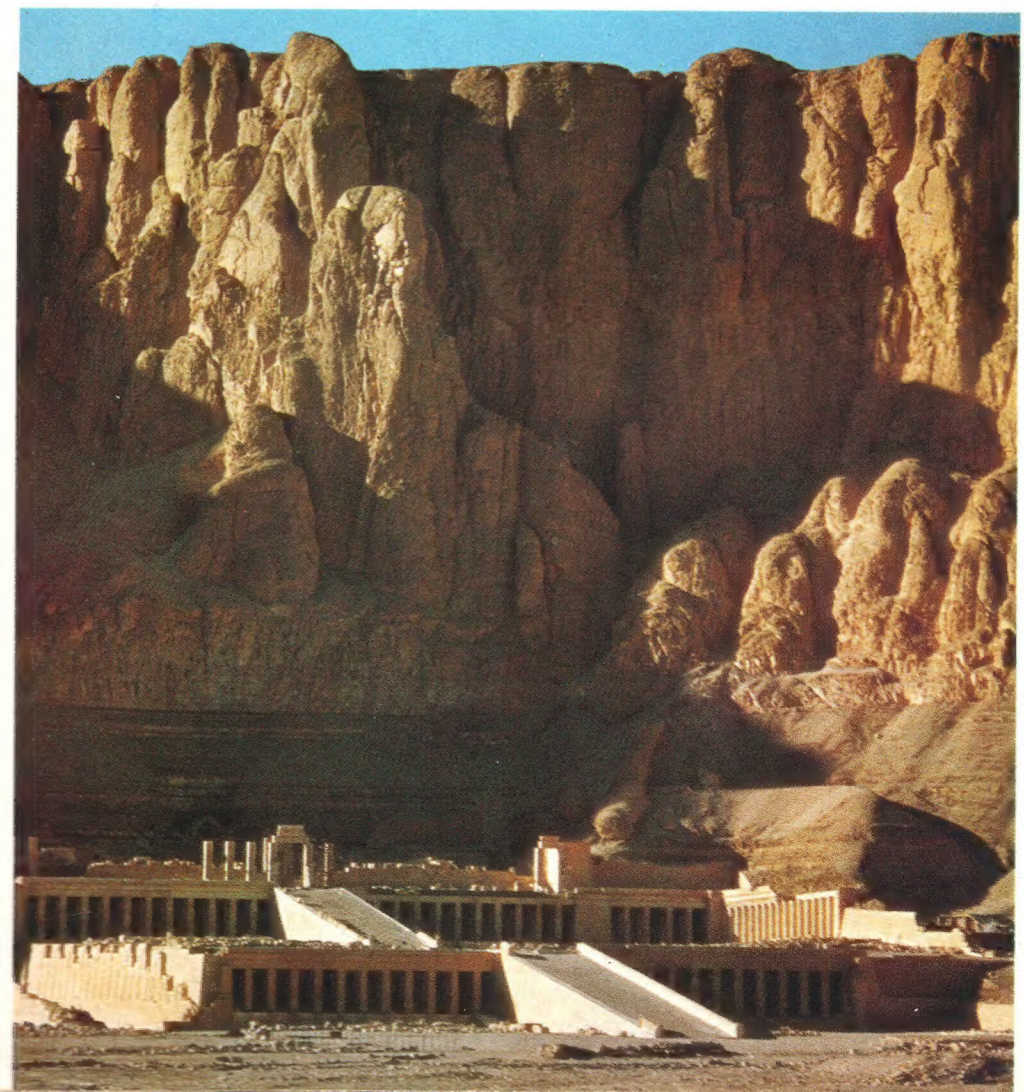
Two standing figures decorate a bone comb, one of the many household objects carved to relieve the sombre tedium of the long north-western winters.

The savagery of this beaked Eskimo mask is softened by its comic little hands.

Figures like this, carved in wood, ornamented the canoe prows of high-ranking chiefs.

EGYPT

The Sphinx, the archetypal symbol of Egypt, rapidly passed into language as a clichéd metaphor for enigmatic immobility. It was deep in sand until excavated in the 20th Century.



The grandeur of the temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir-el-Bahan, accentuated by the classic chiaroscuro, drew British amateur artists by the score.

The great sandstone temple of Rameses II, built in the 13th Century B.C. at Abu Simbel, has now been raised to clear the waters of a man-made lake.

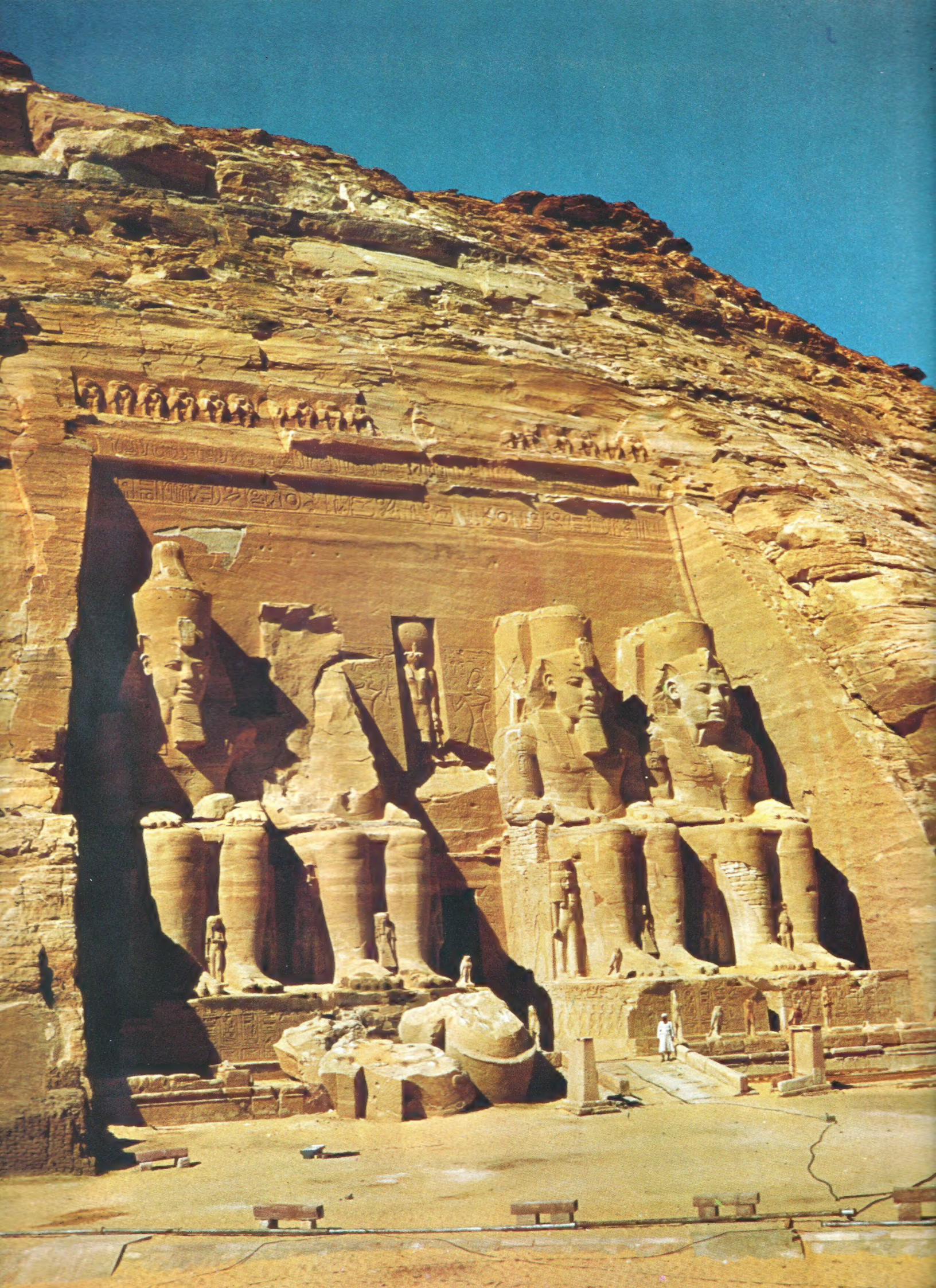
Of all the civilizations that fell beneath the imperial mantle, Egypt was the one that made the most profound impression on the British. Its culture had a majesty, a power, an inscrutability that all the gorgeous exoticism of India and barbaric splendour of African art could not rival.

Long before the British took over in Egypt in the 1880s, they had possessed an imaginative vision of that country provided by generations of artists and writers. When Shakespeare wanted to step up the mystical element in *Othello*, he made sure that the handkerchief on which much of the plot turns was given "by an Egyptian." (Indeed, one writer has facetiously suggested that Shakespeare, whose immortality and apparent freedom from antecedents give him godlike attributes, is in fact an incarnation of the Egyptian god Shepseskere.)

The most absorbing of Egypt's many mysteries were the pyramids, the secret tombs of the Pharaohs. The reason for such wild public enthusiasm when Tutankhamun's treasures were discovered in 1922 was not only the sheer intrinsic and artistic beauty of the works uncovered, but the fact that one of these secret tombs had been divested of its mysteries. It was exciting to demonstrate that monuments which dwarfed men were nevertheless subject to man's domination.

The Egyptian world passed naturally into British proverb and myth. Two of the greatest British statesmen, Disraeli and Joseph Chamberlain, were both described—and caricatured—as sphinxes, for the immobility of their expressions.

Perhaps because of the mystical regard of the British for Egypt, there was never any ribald criticism at the expense of unfamiliar artistic devices that gave goddesses two left feet, even before Picasso showed that such distortion was both intelligent and valid.



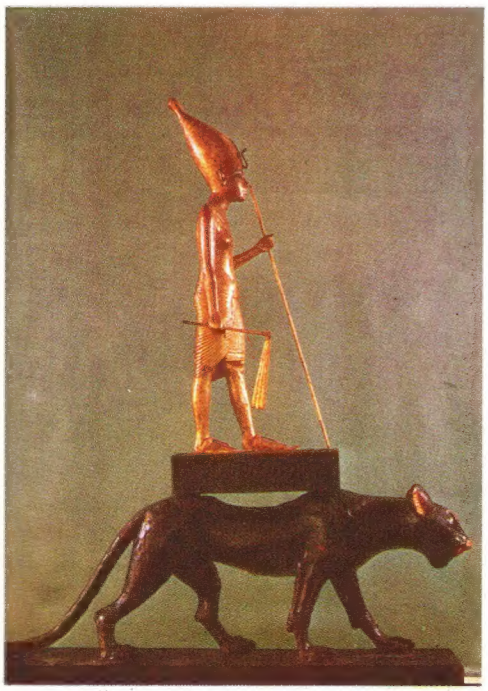
The great golden death-mask of Tutankhamun is the greatest prize of the boy-king's treasures. Its huge value and macabre associations have drawn millions of visitors to Egypt and – in 1972 – to the British Museum exhibition in London.

Egypt: "Wonderful Things"

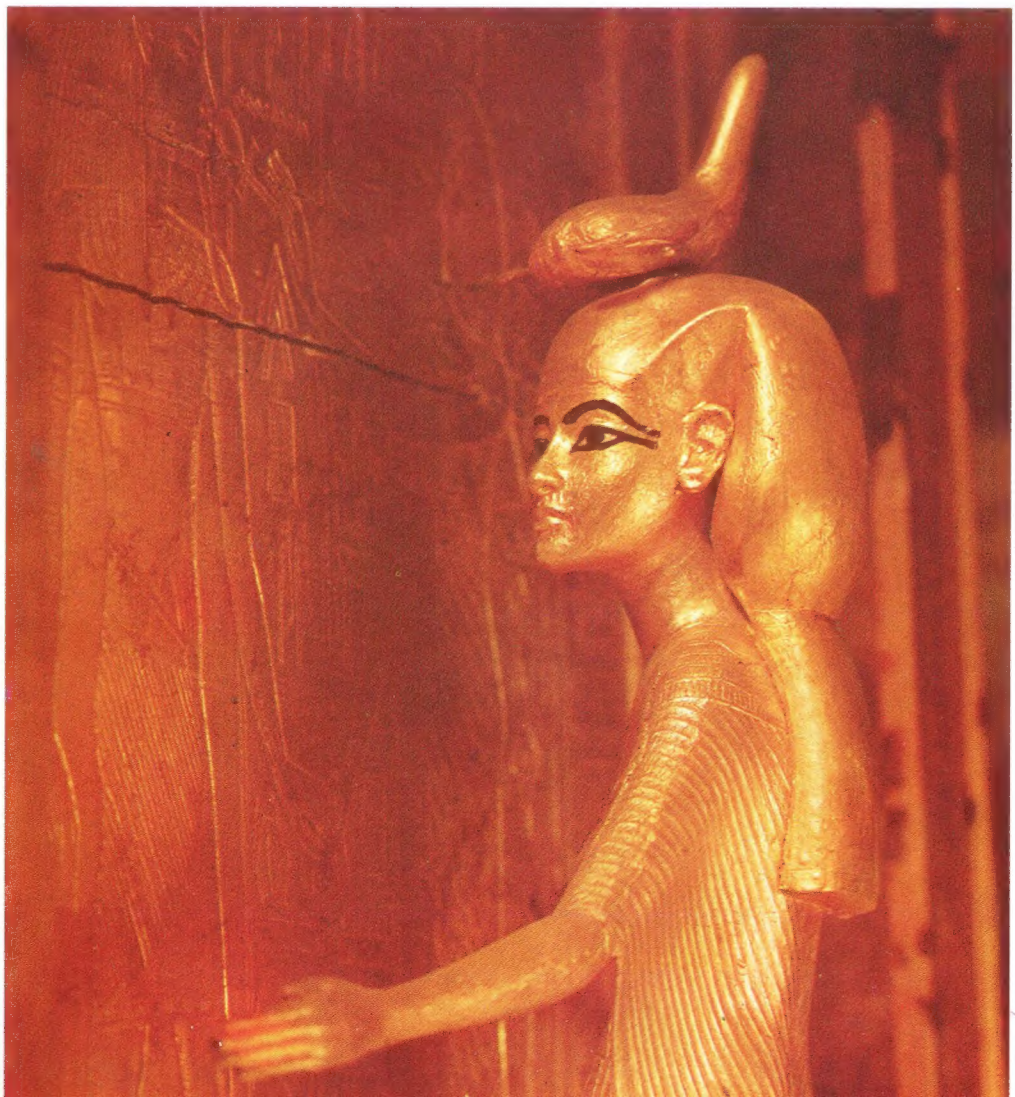
"Beyond the dreams of avarice" was the inevitable Press cliché used to describe the treasure of the boy-king Tutankhamun, uncovered by Lord Carnarvon and Howard Carter in November, 1922. Carter's own first comment on the treasures was more laconic. Asked by Carnarvon what he could see in the gloom as they made their first entry into the tomb, he replied: "Wonderful things."

It was the most thrilling moment that had ever fallen to any archaeologist; and the world was prepared to share the excitement. The parties of bright young 1920s sensation-hunters had eventually to be turned away because they were holding up vital work. The glamour that surrounded the find led to a prolonged public interest in the Tutankhamun treasures themselves. But more than this, it spilled over into British decorative art – Egyptian motifs were all the rage in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in cinema design – and foreshadowed a deeper public interest in the civilizations of other peoples.

In this detail from the back of Tutankhamun's throne, the statuesque, ornately dressed figures seem so divorced from mundane life that they become almost god-like.



Tutankhamun, serenely mounted on a panther, asserts his divine mastery over beasts.



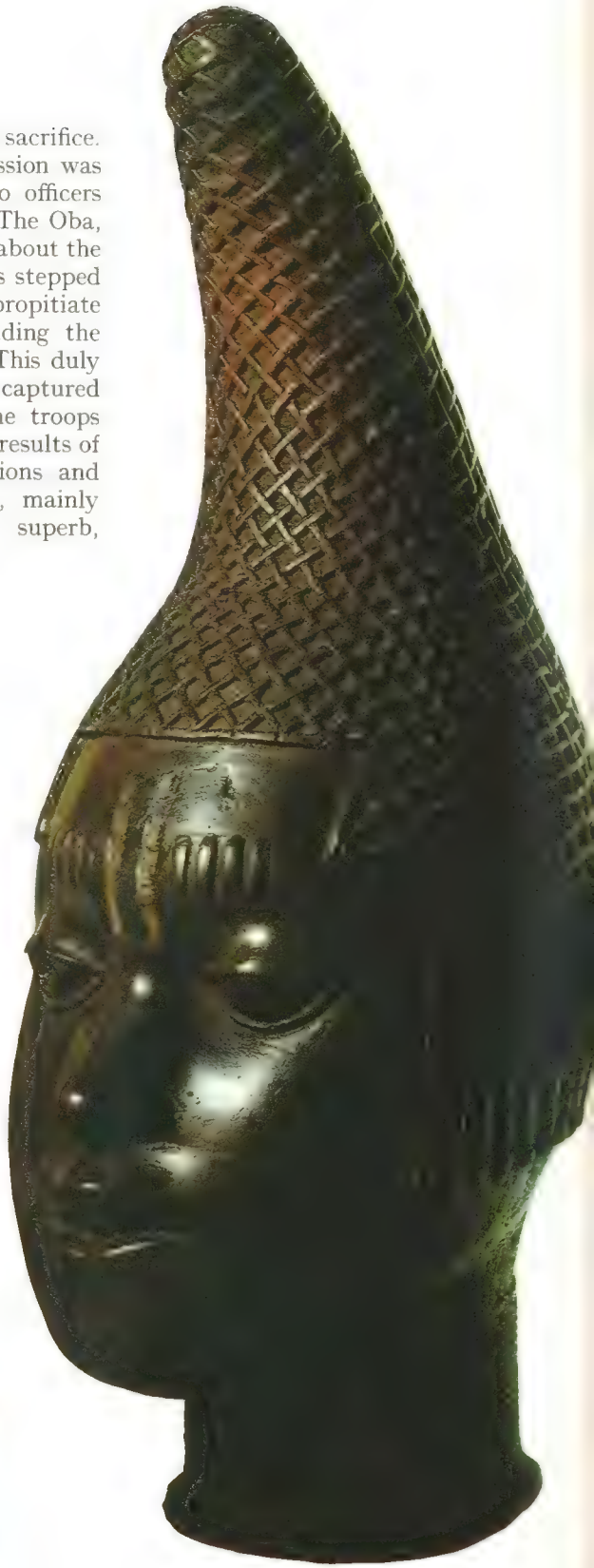
The great kohl-blackened eyes of the goddess Selquet, one of the solid gold guardians of the tomb of Tutankhamun, established a fashion that considerably boosted the British mascara industry in the 1920s.

BENIN

The story of how the British came upon the native art of Benin in Nigeria is an odd one. In 1892, a Captain Henry Gallwey went to the city of Benin to negotiate a treaty on behalf of the Queen with the Oba (King) Ovonramwen. Among other things the treaty was to secure an end to human sacrifice.

Five years later, when it became clear that this aim had failed, a Consul, J. R. Phillips, led an unarmed party of nine white men and about 280 Negro attendants on a mission to change the Oba's grisly ways. Unfortunately for Phillips, at this very time Ovonramwen was celebrating an ancestor festival that involved considerable human sacrifice.

On January 4, 1897, the mission was ambushed and massacred. Two officers escaped and raised the alarm. The Oba, who claimed he had not known about the intended massacre, nevertheless stepped up the rate of human sacrifice to propitiate the gods in the hope of avoiding the expected punitive expedition. This duly arrived two months later and captured Benin on March 17, 1897. The troops were confronted by the horrific results of the King's religious ministrations and also, paradoxically, by works, mainly of bronze, that indicated a superb, centuries-long artistic heritage.



This life-size male bronze head, probably made soon after 1550, was designed to bear the weight of a heavy hollowed-out tusk.

This queen mother's head probably dates from the second quarter of the 16th Century.

The Benin cow sacrifice, shown on this relief,
was performed every year by the Oba at his father's altar.

Benin: Gentle Products of a Murderous People

The bronzes of Benin were, of all African art, the easiest for a European public to appreciate. Though beautifully stylized, they were still strongly representational, depicting proud queens with their high, beaded headdresses, obas in a kind of Balaclava helmet and quaint, obviously revered figures of the Portuguese warriors, with matchlocks and crossbows, who had first burst upon Benin in the 16th Century and who were still being modelled, on the basis of tribal reminiscence, in the late 19th Century.

These representational works were very different from the brutal, demonic masks from other parts of Africa that impressed Picasso and the Cubists in the early 20th Century. There is a humane, almost tender quality about them which may seem incongruous when one considers that they stood on ancestor-altars at festivals of ritual death.

The bronzes were made by the *cire-perdue* (lost wax) method: a wax model was made, and covered with clay; the wax was melted away, and the clay was then used as a mould for bronze. The mould was later removed.

The goggle-like eyes, corrugated beard and four-square stance of this hunter make the bronze, probably a 19th-Century work, more stylized than earlier pieces.

A bronze trumpeter sounding his ivory instrument forms this 16th-Century statuette.

Ivory armlets, like these 16th-Century masterpieces, were worn on ceremonial occasions and were among the most valued of the Oba of Benin's possessions.

These 32-inch ivory leopards were each made from five tusks, probably in the early 19th Century. The spots are formed from copper discs tapped into impressions cut in the ivory. The eyes are pieces of mirror.

INDIA

The art of India exercised a mystical fascination over many of the British who came to the subcontinent. Some were artists, seeking inspiration in the classical austerity of the Taj Mahal or the convoluted voluptuousness of Hindu temples. Two artists, Thomas and William Daniell, in their *Picturesque Voyage to India* of 1810, wrote: "The shores of Asia have been invaded by a race of students with no rapacity but for lettered relics. . . . It remains for the artist to take his part in these guiltless spoliations."

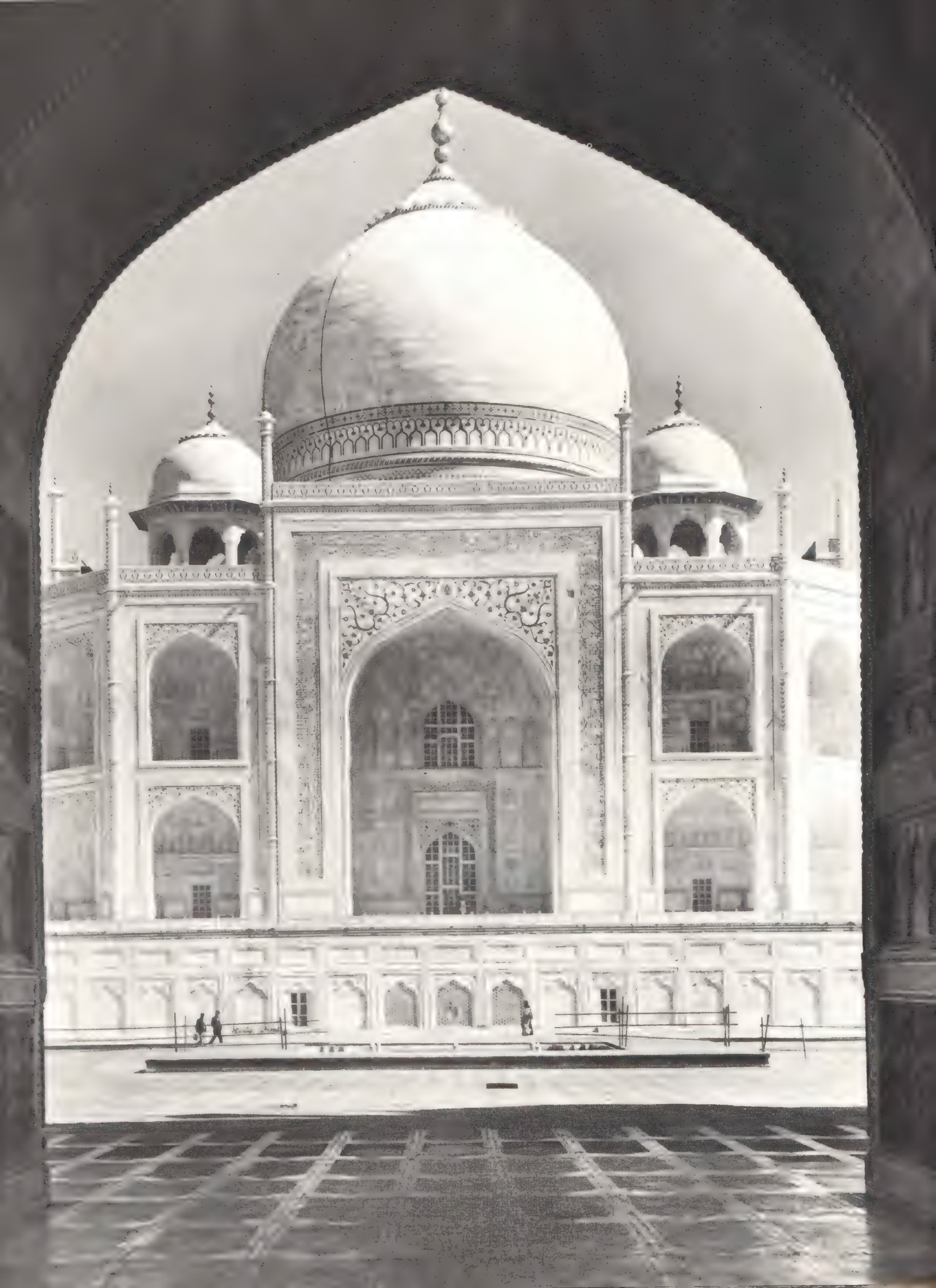
Artists followed this advice: they created luxurious-looking works that mirrored the wealth of Indian princes while architects copied India's domes and painted arches, most dramatically in the Brighton Pavilion, built in 1815.

Several of the British rulers of India, too, showed an enlightened response to its culture. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General in 1773–85, encouraged the British officials to learn Sanskrit and Persian. Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General in 1848–56, collected Indian sculpture that is now in the British Museum. At the turn of the century, Lord Curzon developed an obsessional zeal for preserving Indian monuments: he even spent his own money on a new lamp for the Taj Mahal, which he had restored.

The Golden Temple of Benares, the holiest of Hindu cities, is the most highly revered of the town's 1,500 temples.

The carefully calculated symmetry of buildings like this influenced certain British architects, notably Sir Edwin Lutyens who planned New Delhi.

Of the 17th-Century Taj Mahal, seen here from the west side, a visitor rhapsodized: "It is as the spirit of some happy dream . . . reigning in virgin supremacy over the visible circle of the earth and sky."



India: Cathedrals of Natural Rock

The Buddhist cave-temples of Ellora and Ajanta, near Hyderabad – carved out of solid rock at a time when most buildings were made of wood – were part of the great flowering of Indian culture under the Gupta Emperors in the 5th Century.

The discovery and preservation of the Ajanta caves by the British in the early 19th Century throws light on conventional British reactions to the relics of Indian civilization: professional artists and historians were slow to take an interest – it took ordinary people, some of them soldiers, to point out their beauty and technical perfection.

In 1819 a few soldiers out hunting near Ajanta were led by a cowherd to see some "tiger lairs." The marvellous religious grottoes were thus re-discovered. The caves, some 30 in number, are carved from the side of a precipitous ravine. Rooms run back into the rock up to 70 feet, and many of the roofs are supported by pillars like those of a medieval cathedral. The walls were covered with frescoes that, although carefully copied in 1844, were allowed to fall into decay until quite recently.

In the interior of a Buddhist temple at Ellora, a ritualistic motif, carved from the rock like the rest of the building and all its statues, looms through the dark.

A dancing girl and musicians from the Ajanta caves exemplify the worldliness invested with spirituality that runs through most Indian art.

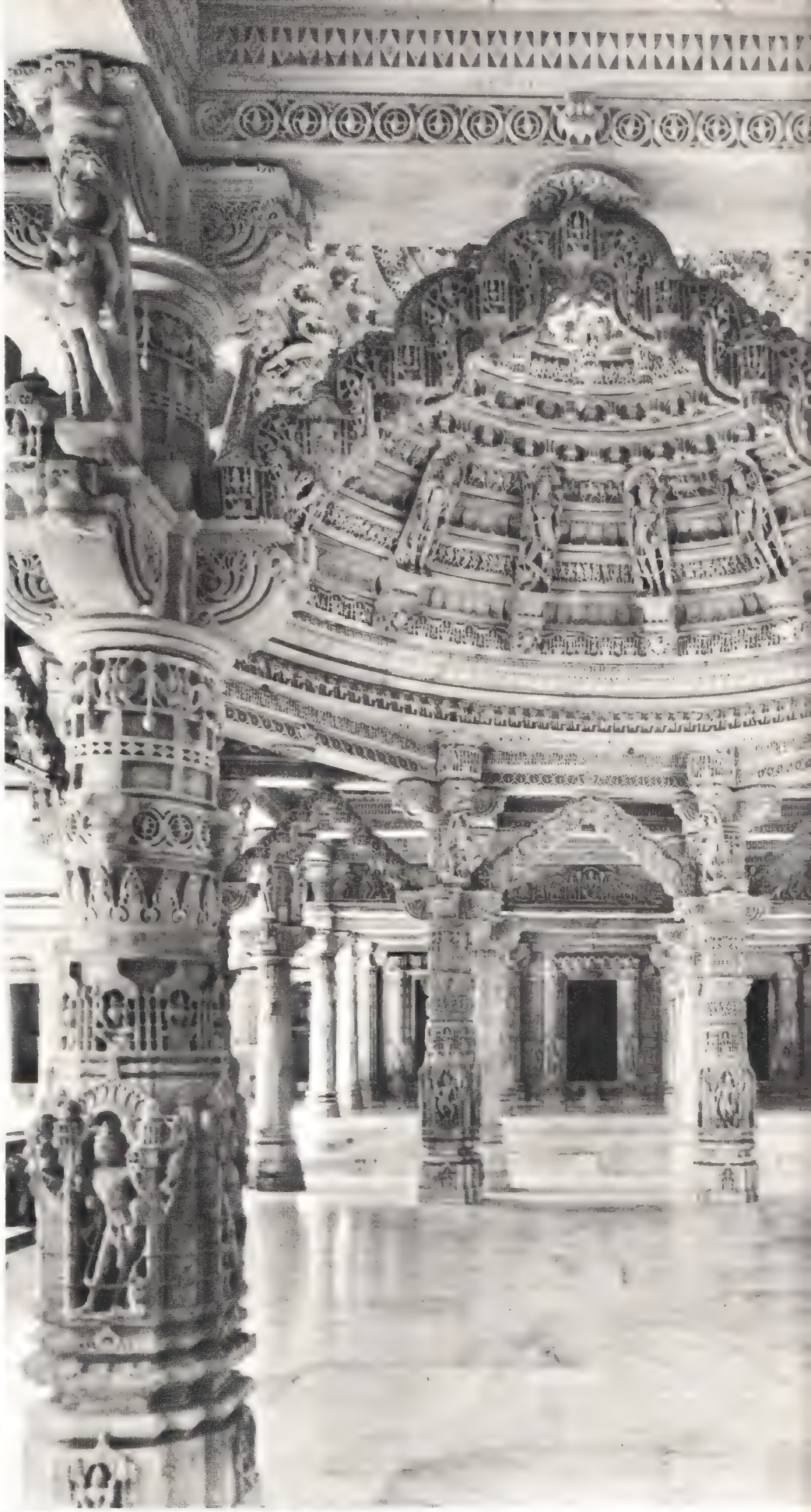
The upper part of the Kailasa Temple at Ellora is a marvellous tissue of stone motifs, so light in execution that the structure shows no sign of having once been single, formless rock.

India: Erotic Divinities

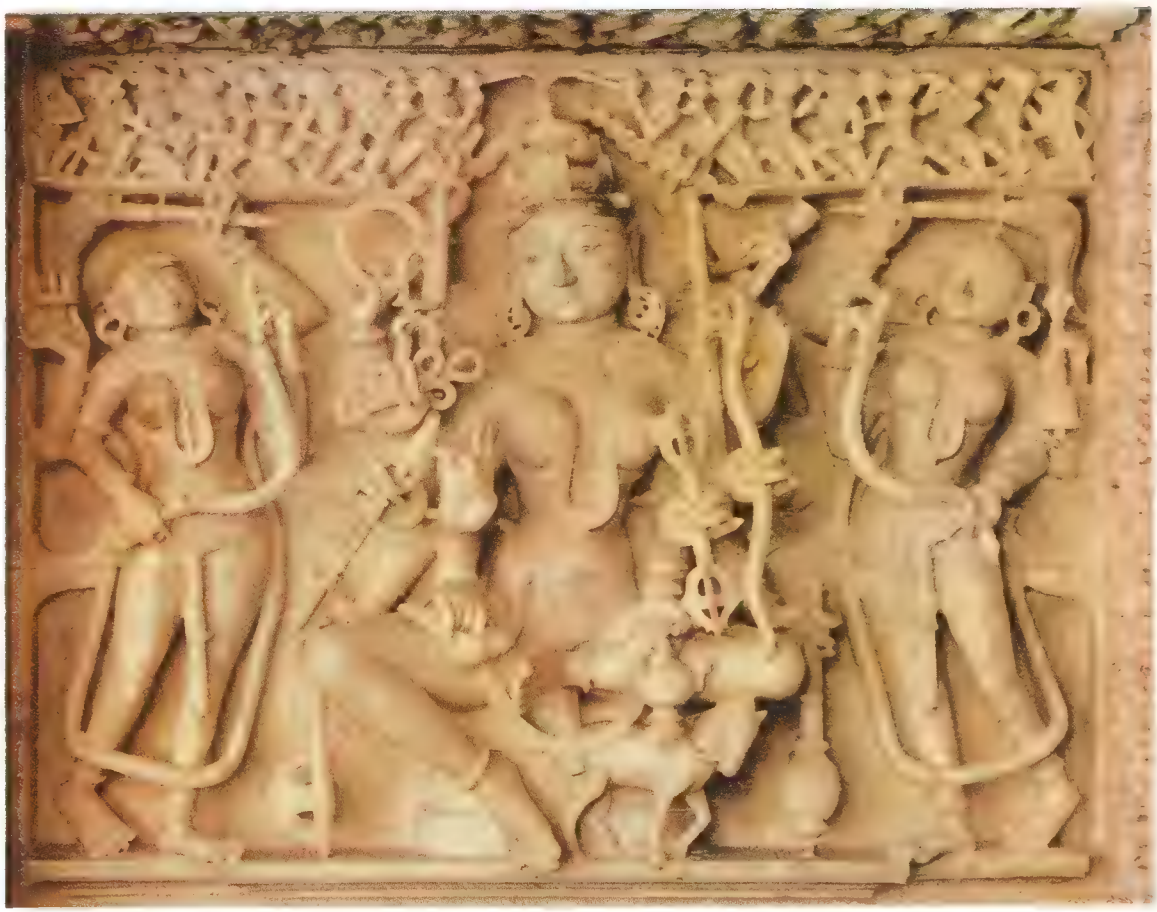
The cathedral carvings to which European travellers were accustomed, for example those of Exeter or Chartres, were saintly and world-forsaking. But the carvings with which Hindu temples were so abundantly covered were often brazenly erotic, and this made them difficult for the more limited kind of British traveller to appreciate – especially Victorians.

There were of course exceptions. A statesman so worldly-wise as Curzon was not likely to be shocked; and in the later years of Empire, certain British visitors saw that while the angels carved on English cathedrals remained obdurately human, the obviously human figures on Indian temples – dancers, full-breasted women, couples in the act of making love – had the very ethereal quality sought by Christian art. This enlightened attitude was displayed by E. B. Havell, for example, who took over the Calcutta School of Art in 1896, and encouraged his Indian students to follow their own indigenous traditions, not just to ape Western representational styles of art. He wrote: "While European art retains the sense and the form of its earthly environment, Indian art is always striving to realize something of the Universal, the Eternal and the Infinite."

This detail of the roof of a temple at Dilwara shows the minute intricacy of the carvings.



The interior of the medieval Dilwara temple on Mount Abu in Rajputana, north-west India, is a glorious concatenation of devotional ornament to inspire the worshipper.



This carving on the roof of one of the temples at Dilwara in Rajputana shows the languorous, serpentine forms in which Indian sculptors revelled.

The horizontal striations of the Kandariya Mahadeo Temple, in Bundelkand, central India, emphasize the sense of growth in its bulbous pyramidal structures.

BURMA & CEYLON

When Mrs. Ernest Hart, globe-trotter and cookery expert, published her *Picturesque Burma Past and Present* in 1897, she deplored the fact that the country was so little known to British tourists. There was much to see: the great Buddhist temple of Rangoon, the royal city of Mandalay, hymned by Kipling; the ruined glories of Amaurapoora and the temples of Pagahn.

Mrs. Hart was one of those sympathetic visitors who even had the grace to wish that Burma, taken over by the British in successive 19th-Century wars, had been allowed to develop into an independent power like Japan, and she attacked British philistinism: "A harsh discordant note is struck by the railroad running through the very gardens of the temples of Amaurapoora, by the presence of British cantonments in the walled cities and by the click of the billiard balls in the Audience Hall of Kings."

In Ceylon from the early days of British rule in the late 18th Century, a more enlightened attitude was shown to the monuments of the ancient civilization of Kandy and even to the gruesome "devil dancers'" masks that were used by witch-doctors to cast out disease.

The many minarets of Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma, the largest Buddhist place of worship in the world, flank a vast tower covered with gold-leaf.

These fearsome masks, made of painted wood, were worn by "devil dancers" to scare away the evil spirits – Garayaka, for example – which were thought to cause diseases. To increase their magical powers of combat against such demons as bronchial catarrh or delirious fever, two of them are crowned by deadly, rearing cobras.

JAVA

Probably no British possession has ever had an administrator more eager to immerse himself in its native culture than Thomas Stamford Raffles, who became Lieutenant-Governor of the former Dutch colony of Java in 1811.

His tenure was short: he was replaced in 1816, and shortly afterwards the colony was returned to the Dutch. But in that time, Raffles, who turned himself into a scholar as a youthful East India Company employee, had made a thorough and brilliant study of the island civilization, and made a superb collection of Javanese cult-objects. Among them were some of the marvellously decorated puppets, derived partly from Indian religious tradition, used in Javanese shadow-drama or *wayang purwa*.

The collection, which after his death passed to the British Museum, also included gaudy instruments from the *gamelan*, or Javanese orchestra, several of which were carved with savage heads, like the prows of Viking ships. There were different varieties of bands, one of which, wrote Raffles, resembled "the croaking of frogs"; another was essentially martial, and its gongs, trumpets, xylophones, cymbals and harps were used to accompany troops in processions.

This five-foot saron (a xylophonic instrument with metal keys), was part of the Javanese *gamelan* or orchestra. Javanese music had ancient traditions: in 1580, it had impressed Sir Francis Drake, in Java during his voyage around the world.

The three Javanese shadow puppets shown here performed in dramas based partly on two Indian epic poems, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Hanoman (far left), was a monkey general who was the main ally of Rama (left), hero of the *Ramayana*. The puppet on the right is based on a wise king, Kresna, a character in the *Mahabharata*.

OCEANIA

Captain James Cook's voyages to the apparently free-living and free-loving isles of the South Seas in the late 18th Century presented his contemporaries with something of a paradox: he had, it seemed, discovered the land of the "Noble Savage," where men lived in a state of nature unsullied by the impurities of civilization. Yet these same people could also be undeniably devilish, as the discovery of occasional cannibalism among the Maoris and Cook's own murder by the Tahitians showed.

There was of course no real paradox: both views were oversimplified. Oceanic societies had their own behaviour patterns, their own rituals, their own artistic heritage. It would take long research to acquire an understanding of them. For the time being, men could only note the intricacies of skilfully-carved Maori sculptures, record the existence of imposing "idols" on Easter Island – and admit awareness of their ignorance.

This Maori figure, decorated with human hair, is free-standing, but such figures are generally part of house-support poles.

A Maori *atua*, or god-figure.

The figure-of-eight form on this Maori greenstone *tiki*, an ornamental pendant, may be intended to represent a foetus.

The ornamentation crammed on to this Maori trinket box reflects the primitive dislike for blank space on works of art.

Oceania: Master-Craftsmen of the Solomons

Most British visitors found the gentle art of the Solomon Islands more acceptable than the war-like and demonic works of other Pacific Islanders. Writers spoke with admiration of the Solomon houses, with their totemic props; the magnificently carved canoes; and in particular the personal ornaments.

Shell work was the speciality of the islands. The larger ornaments, such as pectoral pendants, were made of clam shells, ornamented with superimposed turtle-shell in filigree work. The natives were particularly expert at inlaying mother of pearl. The tesselated pieces were let into the wood, and fastened in by a glue obtained from a nut called *saea*. There were several traditional patterns – the frigate bird was a favourite – but the native craftsmen were also capable of ingenious improvisation.

Accomplished carving went into the canoes of Alu and Treasury Islands in the Bougainville Straits; the canoe gods, lashed to the helm, are curiously benign in expression, compared with the baleful savagery of much other Oceanic art. Another article by which the islanders set much store was the village drum, a special treasure kept in the chief's house and used for drumming out mortal curses on neighbouring villages. These too were subjects for virtuoso carving.

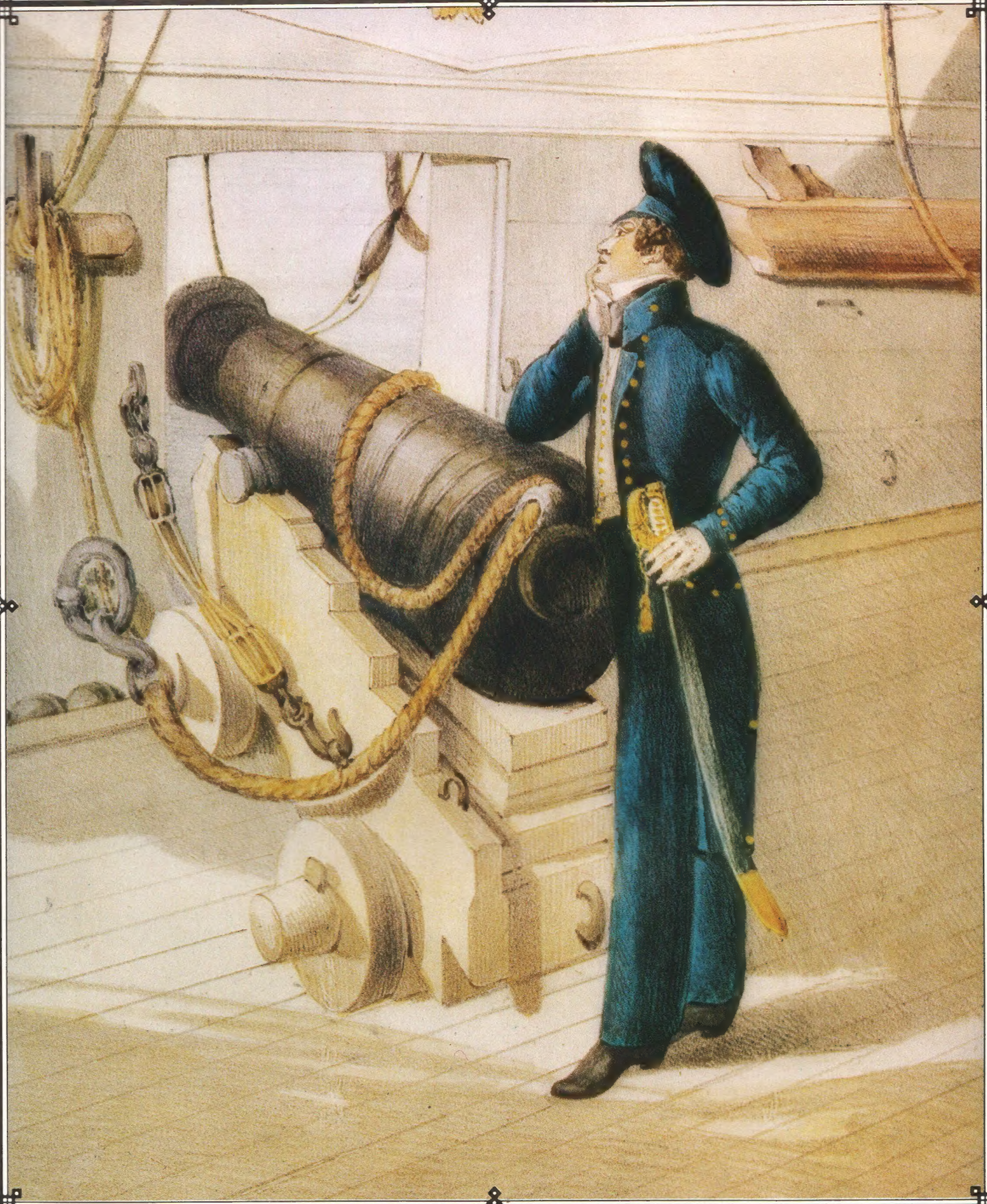
Drums, turtle-shell combs, shell ornaments and even canoes were brought back, together with the plaited grass decorations that the Solomon Islanders also made, as suitable ethnic trappings for those profusely cluttered arenas, the Victorian drawing-room and studio.

The canoe-prow figure (left) with its inlet shell eyes, was fixed in position on ornamental prows, as shown on the right.

A beautifully inlaid shark-figure testifies to the religious importance the islanders gave to this fish. They believed a man's soul became associated with it after death.

This sculpted portrait was made from a real human skull. A resinous material was used to mould the "flesh" which bears the tattoo-pattern the man himself had worn in life.

This powerfully sculpted god-head is from Mangareva, an island in the middle of the Pacific. The bald and unadorned quality of the head, anticipating 20th-Century European sculpture, is a living admonition to art historians to be wary of sweeping generalizations about the "inevitable" complexity of primitive art.



Master's Assistant, Royal Navy, 1828

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